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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ADDIS ABABA 001484

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AF FOR DAS SWAN AND A/S FRAZIER
DRL FOR DAS KRILLA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/15/2017

TAGS: PGOV PREL PHUM ET ER

SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA: DAS SWAN URGES GOE TO MOVE FORWARD ON RELEASE OF DETAINEES

REF: ADDIS 1420

Classified By: Pol/Econ Counselor Kevin Sullivan for reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: AF DAS Jim Swan urged Minister Bereket Simon, Public Relations advisor to Prime Minister Meles, to seize the opportunity presented by a written apology from detained CUD leaders to release them. Bereket clearly took the point on board, but offered the standard GOE reply that the legal process must take its course. Bereket also briefed Swan on current difficulties in the inter-party dialogue on democratic reforms, noting that the major opposition groups had pulled out "because they did not get 100 percent of what they wanted." Pol/Econ Counselor suggested that the Embassy might intercede with opposition leaders to bring them back to the table; Bereket welcomed the initiative. He also argued that ruling party discussions with youth leaders were "changing the public atmosphere" and that most Ethiopians were now far more concerned about the cost of living and public services than in the fate of the CUD detainees. Bereket also suggested that Ethiopians continued to support the GOE's efforts in Somalia. Comment: the GOE is now in a good position to release the CUD leaders if they wish to do so, and DAS Swan's message from the Department on this point was extremely useful. It may be useful for other Department officials to reinforce this message. Concerning the current breakdown in the inter-party dialogue, however, most of the blame probably goes to opposition leaders who have walked out over questionable issues, rather than finding compromise solutions. Post has already begun trying to jawbone them back to the table. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) On May 11, AF DAS Jim Swan called on Bereket Simon, Public Relations Advisor to the Prime Minister with the rank of Minister and the GOE's senior representative in political talks with the opposition. Bereket was joined by EPRDF international affairs rep Sekuture Getachew. Pol/Econ Counselor, Deputy and visiting Amb. John Yates accompanied Swan.

SWAN ASK GOE TO SEIZE OPPORTUNITY OF APOLOGY LETTER

¶3. (C) After noting that the main purpose of his visit to Addis was to discuss cooperation with the GOE on Somalia, DAS Swan told Bereket that he was also interested in discussing Ethiopia's internal situation. He said that progress on President Bush's global "freedom agenda" in Ethiopia was of

great interest both to the Administration and to Congress. Swan asked specifically about recent developments on democratic reforms under discussion with the opposition, as well as about efforts by a group of Ethiopian elders (reftel) to broker the release of detained leaders from the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD). He remarked that the detainees remained an important symbolic issue, and "putting the problem behind you" would represent a dramatic step forward. The DAS noted that the two best-known leaders of the CUD, party chairman Hailu Shawel and Addis Mayor-elect Berhanu Nega, had signed a letter apologizing for damage caused during riots in November 2005 and committing themselves to respect the Constitution and the democratic process. Swan urged the GOE to seize the opportunity of this letter, rather than seeking something further from the detainees, to deflect criticism of Ethiopia's human rights record and get democratization moving forward again.

¶4. (C) Bereket agreed that both democratic reforms and the situation of the detainees were important for both the USG and the GOE. Both governments needed to work together to advance their common interests on these matters. After reviewing key developments during and after the 2005 national election campaign, Bereket concluded that the opposition had refused to accept the results of the election and had instead sought to stage a "coup" by exploiting unemployed youth in the cities. Since then, the GOE had pursued two main goals: 1) restore law and order; and 2) create a new, wider space for the opposition. In the new, post-election political environment, the "ruling party decides, and the opposition has a right to be heard," Bereket said.

¶5. (C) The PM's advisor told Swan that the GOE had pursued

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negotiations with the opposition prior to the "showdown" in November 2005, but that once the November strikes and demonstrations had sought to overthrow the EPRDF by force, the GOE had pursued a legal/judicial approach to the problem.

The GOE had subsequently made its case in court, and the court's initial ruling had found merit in the charges of subversion against CUD leaders. Bereket said that "it is in our interest to see the judicial process run its course." He noted that the initiative undertaken by the elders to broker clemency for the detainees had experienced ups and downs, but had been frustrated in the end. He could not say what the future of the process would be. DAS Swan pressed on whether the GOE truly supported the elders initiative or was simply committed to the trial, to which Bereket responded that the Prime Minister was handling the discussions directly, but that in the meantime the detainees were being offered a speedy, fair trial. He added that when some participants in recent town hall meetings in Addis had tried to raise the issue of the detainees, others had complained, wanting to talk instead about inflation or other more practical concerns.

¶6. (C) Swan concluded on this issue by noting that as long the detention of CUD leaders continued, it would remain a focal point for concerns about democratization and could overshadow progress in other areas. He suggested that the GOE do a careful cost/benefit analysis concerning the situation and reconsider the idea of releasing the detainees based on the letter they had submitted to the elders.

REFORM TALKS STALLED -- CAN POST HELP?

¶7. (C) Concerning talks on democratic reform, he thanked Swan for the help that the USG had provided through USAID-funded studies on parliamentary rules, national election board (NEB) and the draft media law. The current issue at hand was a draft electoral law and the appointment of a new, nine-member NEB. Bereket said that the GOE had accepted nearly all the suggestions offered in the donor study of the NEB, but that opposition leaders were demanding that "100 percent of their

proposals be adopted, or they would walk out." Among the most contentious issues was the question of foreign election observation, which opposition leaders said must be mandated in the new law. The GOE, for its part, maintained that domestic observers had a right to monitor polls, but the GOE would determine when to issue invitations to international observers. Bulcha Demeksa of the OFDM, who had been assigned to coordinate the NEB vetting process, had pulled his party out of talks over this disagreement, probably at the urging of the UEDF, which had already walked out over the vetting process itself, Bereket suggested.

¶18. (C) Pol/Econ Counselor acknowledged Bereket's point that the GOE had come a long way on the NEB vetting process and agreed that the opposition had been somewhat inflexible and quick to abandon the reform talks. He offered the U.S. Embassy's assistance in bringing opposition leaders back to the table for further discussion. Bereket welcomed Post's help on this score.

BEREKET -- PUBLIC SUPPORT ON SOMALIA REMAINS SOLID

¶19. (C) Amb. Yates, head of Embassy Nairobi's Somalia Unit, asked Bereket about Ethiopian public opinion with respect to the GOE's military intervention in Somalia. Bereket replied that the ruling party had built a solid case for the existence of a real, immediate threat in Somalia. Internal pressure on Ethiopia's continuing military presence there had been too great, he said, although Al Jazeera propaganda had not been helpful. In fact, international media opinion had posed a far greater challenge than domestic political opinion. Bereket also claimed that people understood the need for a strong GOE response to other recent security issues, including the abductions of Ethiopians and international tourists in the Afar Region and the attack against the Chinese oil facility in the Ogaden.

¶10. (C) Bereket did acknowledge that the financial burden of Ethiopian military operations in Somalia was considerable. "We are carrying the burden of Africa," he said. "This

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should have been the African Union's issue." Nonetheless, the GOE realized that failing to secure Ethiopia against the threat (of the Islamic Courts) would have been even more costly in the long run. He also noted that the biggest security threat for Ethiopia remained Eritrea, although it did currently have the military capacity to attack.

COMMENT: RELEASE AND DIALOGUE NEEDED BEFORE ELECTIONS

¶11. (C) The GOE is now in a good position to release the CUD leaders if they wish to do so, and DAS Swan's message from the Department on this point was extremely useful. It may be useful for other senior USG officials to reinforce this message again. Concerning the current breakdown in the inter-party dialogue, however, most of the blame probably goes to the opposition leaders who have walked out over questionable issues, rather than finding a compromise solutions. Post has already begun trying to jawbone them back to the table and will continue to do so. It will be difficult to hold successful local elections in Ethiopia within the next 6-8 months without both the release of the CUD detainees and significant progress on Ethiopia's electoral law and institutions.

¶12. (C) DAS Swan cleared on this message.
YAMAMOTO